

SEEDS 2

**Supporting Women's Work
around the World**



**Edited by Ann Leonard
Introduction by Martha Chen**

**Afterwords by
Mayra Buvinić, Misrak Elias,
Rounaq Jahan, Caroline Moser,
and Kathleen Staudt**

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THE FEMINIST PRESS
at The City University of New York
New York

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99 98 97 96 95 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seeds 2 : supporting women's work around the world / edited by Ann Leonard ; introduction by Martha Alter Chen ; afterword by Mayra Buvinic . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Originally published in a pamphlet series Seeds.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55861-107-X (alk. paper). — ISBN 1-55861-106-1 (alk. paper)

1. Women in development—Developing countries—Case studies.
2. Women in business—Developing countries—Case studies. 3. Women—Employment—Developing countries—Case studies. 4. Women in community development—Developing countries—Case studies. 5. Child care services—Developing countries—Case studies. I. Leonard, Ann, 1945— . II. Seeds (New York, N.Y.) III. Title: Seeds two.

HQ1240.5.D44S44 1995

305.4'09172'4—dc20

95-4144

CIP

This book is an outgrowth of the Seeds booklet series on women's income-generating activities. Project direction and administrative support for Seeds are provided by the Population Council. Funding for production of this book has been made possible primarily by The Ford Foundation. Since its inception, support for the Seeds project has been provided by The Carnegie Corporation, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), The Ford Foundation, the General Services Foundation, the Government of the Netherlands, the Interamerican Foundation, Oxfam America, the Population Council, the Rockefeller Foundation, UNICEF, UNIFEM, and the Women in Development Office of the United States Agency for International Development.

Cover photo: Janice Jiggins

Cover design: Lucinda Geist

Typeset by Stanton Publication Services, Inc., Saint Paul, Minnesota

Text design by Paula Martinac

Design and Production: Tina Malaney

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper by McNaughton and Gunn, Inc.

Preface

It has now been almost twenty years since the ground-breaking first International Women's Conference in Mexico City launched the official United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985). The decade ended in Nairobi in 1985, with a jubilant celebration of women's achievements, endurance, creativity, and hope for the future. But today, as we look toward the 1995 International Women's Conference, to be held in Beijing, it is clear that a great deal remains to be done. The increasing "feminization of poverty" in countries of both the North and the South testifies to the fact that, despite increased attention to women's livelihoods, the economic responsibilities imposed on women in most parts of the world to maintain not only themselves but their families are increasing more rapidly than their earning opportunities.

The Seeds booklet series on women's income-generating activities was begun in the late 1970s in response to the dearth of information available on successful efforts by and for women to earn an income. The series commissions and publishes case studies of economic development projects that focus on women. When the series was launched, it was our belief that by the end of the decade, women's economic conditions and perceptions of women would have changed to such an extent that documentation efforts such as Seeds would no longer be needed.

That this is not the case is evident not only from the world situation noted above, but also from the continually increasing interest in Seeds among new as well as previous generations of readers. As this book goes

to press, seventeen case studies have been documented in the series; nine have been translated into Spanish, eight into French; and a local language program established with colleagues in developing countries has resulted in publication of Seeds booklets in Arabic, Bahasa (Indonesia), Hindi (India), Kiswahili (East Africa), Nepali, Thai, Urdu (Pakistan), and Vietnamese.

In 1989, the first Seeds book, *Seeds: Supporting Women's Work in the Third World*, was published by The Feminist Press. This volume brings together nine case studies and four original essays that set them within the broader context of women's economic development from both international and regional perspectives. Having the case studies available in book format has made this material accessible to an entirely new audience of general readers and scholars alike.

As we entered the 1990s, the Seeds Steering Committee realized that there had been enough significant changes in the field of women's economic development to warrant revising the introduction that accompanies each case study. The text was emended to broaden the concept of women's work from simply earning income to encompassing their need to "generate livelihoods and to improve their economic status"; and for selection of projects that serve "not only to strengthen women's productive roles, but also to integrate women into various sectors of development, both social and economic."

The seven new case studies included in this second *Seeds* volume illustrate this change in direction. They also focus attention on the similarity of the economic problems women face in all parts of the world (as evidenced by publication in 1993 of the first booklet to feature a project in the United States) and highlight the organizational requirements of success—such as the significant role of training and experience in mounting an effective project, the vital links between women's family and work roles, and the importance of political consciousness in forging economic change.

The introduction to this edition, written by Martha Chen, of the Harvard Institute of International Development, and afterwords by Mayra Buvinic, Misrak Elias, Rounaq Jahan, and Caroline Moser address the changes that are taking place in this field—particularly in the decade between Nairobi and Beijing—from a variety of perspectives and outline issues that will need to be addressed as we approach the dawn of a new century. We have also asked Kathleen Staudt to update her excellent essay, "Planting *Seeds* in the Classroom," for this volume to include a discussion of the new material and how it can be used in a variety of academic settings.

For all of us involved in its development, the Seeds project remains a rewarding effort. We are pleased that, through this book, we are able to share with you the reality of women's lives from cultures around the world

in a way that, while illustrative of the problems they face, focuses on women's strength, courage, and ingenuity in meeting challenges and bringing about change.

Ann Leonard
for the Seeds Steering Committee

Acknowledgments

On the copyright page of this volume are listed all the donors who have made the Seeds project possible over the years. We are grateful to all of them for their support. However, we would like to note here the special role that The Ford Foundation has played, as the first home base for the project and, subsequently, by providing continued financial support and program expertise over the years.

The role of the Steering Committee in setting editorial policy and developing individual case studies has been pivotal to the success of the project. Special thanks go to both current and former members: Kristin Anderson, Betsy Campbell, Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen, Margaret Clark, Misrak Elias, Adrienne Germain, Anne Kubisch, Cecilia Lotse, Karen McGuinness, Katharine McKee, Kirsten Moore, Jill Sheffield, William Sweeney, Anne Walker, and Mildred Warner.

As it has since the early 1980s, the Population Council continues to provide project direction and administrative support for Seeds and to serve as the project's home base. Administrative and editorial oversight are carried out by Ann Leonard, project coordinator/editor, with the assistance of Judith Bruce, project advisor, Margaret Catley-Carlson, Council President, and George Brown, Vice President of the Programs Division, are to be acknowledged for their stalwart support of this project; special thanks also go to Tim Thomas, Executive Assistant, for his continuing interest in the Seeds project.

And finally, we acknowledge the people who truly made it all possible—the grassroots women whose stories are told in these case studies.

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Introduction

Martha Alter Chen

I. Looking Back

Twenty years ago, when the international women's movement was officially launched, there was a common belief that if women could obtain a job for wages outside the home, or otherwise earn an independent income, they would be able to exercise control over the income they earned and thus to exercise increased bargaining power within their homes. This, in turn, would lead to improvements in their own and their family's well-being. Twenty years later, this belief has been challenged by a wide cross-section of women in the movement. What happened to challenge these initial beliefs? What brought about this change in thinking?

Certainly, the international women's movement has become more sophisticated in its thinking and operation. In 1975, most of the scholars, activists, planners, and advocates involved in the women's movement thought the tasks at hand were to increase the visibility of women (particularly as workers); to increase women's access to the processes of development (especially economic development); and to develop special offices, special mechanisms, and special projects for women (at both the local and national levels). We therefore undertook detailed descriptive studies of women's work, designed innovative income-generating projects for women, and lobbied for women's integration into the development process.

By 1985, however, most of us had begun to question some of these

assumptions. Did we, in fact, want to integrate women into the existing development models? Were separate (but seldom equal) offices and mechanisms for women really useful? Did isolated, local income-generation projects for women produce the intended benefits? We asked these questions because we had become increasingly aware that the root causes of women's problems are not economic (in the narrow sense of jobs and income) but structural and political. Women everywhere began to call for a redefinition of economic development. And we called for collective organization and empowerment of women. But, at the same time, we found it difficult to translate this new way of thinking into actual, specific programs and policies. This was partly because we were asking women to challenge age-old as well as modern structures while, at the same time, these structures were themselves changing in ways that often proved contradictory for women.

In 1975, the economic orthodoxy of the 1950s and '60s was just beginning to be challenged. And while concern for basic needs had been voiced, the promise that continued economic growth would lead to development for all seemed assured. By 1985, however, the persistence of widespread poverty, the failure of growth policies in numerous countries, and an international economic recession had precipitated a reassessment of economic development. One result was the adoption of corrective economic measures, known as structural adjustment policies (SAPs), by many developing nations at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The focus of such policies is economic stabilization, increased privatization, and debt refinancing.

One aspect of this reassessment was the recognition that the economic crises of debt, trade, and the environment have global dimensions and that solutions to these crises must be negotiated on the global stage. Meanwhile, certain political crises also gained momentum, intensity, and global proportions—religious fundamentalism, civil strife within nations, and ethno-nationalistic movements—all having concomitant effects on both economic and human development. By the early 1990s, the collapse of communism had unleashed a new wave of ethno-nationalism and created a global political climate of unprecedented uncertainty, as well as promise.

While the world as a whole was visibly shaken by these global crises, women (and their children) were being buffeted by a less visible but equally consequential, and not unrelated, local crisis—within the family itself. While marriage remains almost universal across most regions and social groups in developing countries, the number of years an adult woman is likely to live without a partner in residence, and the number of women who are likely to raise children without a partner, are surprisingly high. Due to the death of an older spouse, the migration of a working spouse,

desertion and divorce, or polygamy (a feature of family life still evident in many parts of the world), many women today are maintaining families virtually on their own (Bruce et al. 1995).

II. Taking Stock

What has been the impact of these global and domestic forces on the lives and work of women? The evidence is somewhat contradictory. In the developing world, women have made considerable progress over the last thirty years. Life expectancy, literacy, educational attainment, and political participation of women have all improved, yet the gap between men's and women's achievement continues. Although women's average life expectancy now exceeds men's in some developing countries, women lag behind men in terms of other measures of human development. The following table shows the number of women achieving a variety of development goals as measured against every 100 men attaining the same level (UNDP 1991, 30, 139), as follows:

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Adult Literacy	66	100
Mean Years of Schooling	53	100
Labor Force Participation	52	100
Election to Parliament	15	100

And throughout most of the world—including developed countries—women continue to earn, on average, two-thirds of what men do.

In addition to this human development gap, other indicators reveal that poverty is increasingly a female problem—indicators of what can be, and has been, called in both developing and developed world settings the “feminization of poverty.”¹ To set the stage, it is important to note that the large majority of the world's women (62 percent) live in countries with very low per-capita gross domestic production (GDP)—less than US \$1,000 per year—and very low or declining economic growth—less than US \$10 per year and declining (UN 1991, 96). Of course, so do the large majority of the world's men. But within poor countries, women are more impoverished than men. In most developing countries, households supported by women are often economically disadvantaged: that is, the poorest households often include large numbers of female-headed households.

For example, in Brazil, female-headed households make up 10 percent of all households but account for 15 percent of all households that are poor (WDR 1990, 31). And within most poor households, women (and girls) are economically deprived, usually receiving less food, medical care, and education than men (and boys).

Why has this gender gap in human development persisted (or even increased in some areas), despite the efforts of the international women's movement? In addition to the aspects of the recent economic situation, noted above, that have generated pervasive insecurity for poor men and women alike, there are continuing aspects of traditional systems—discriminatory customs and norms regarding the sexual division of work, marriage and family, inheritance and property—which serve to perpetuate gender inequality. In addition, many gender inequalities deeply embedded in traditional marriage and kinship systems are, in turn, reinforced by modern law. Among the more notable examples is the fact that in many countries, women are denied the same rights as men, under both customary and modern law, to own or inherit property.

In addition, there is discrimination within governmental structures—including differential access to public sector services and discriminatory policies and regulations—which perpetuates gender inequality. In many countries in the developing world, social services (health and education), development services (credit, extension, technology), and the institutional structures that support development (local government, cooperatives, trade unions) are universally open to men but either closed or inaccessible to women.

Furthermore, patterns of economic development and their associated impact on women's employment have proved to be more complex than had been predicted. Economists have long been divided as to whether industrialized development in third-world countries would push women out of or pull them into wage work. In the 1960s, Ester Boserup, among others, argued that women were prominent as workers in traditional forms of production but that the growth of the modern sector in developing countries threatened to displace and thereby marginalize them as workers (Boserup 1970). For example, in Bangladesh, the husking of "paddy" (pounding the harvested rice husks to separate the grain) traditionally was the work of women. However, when this task was mechanized, it became the work of men—and not even the work of male relatives of the displaced women workers but men from higher-status families.

An alternative hypothesis put forward was that trade liberalization and export-led industrialization would lead to many new jobs, which would favor an increase in female employment. But over the next three decades, as noted above, the impact of economic development on wom-

en's employment proved more complex than the early theorists had predicted.

Take, for example, the phenomenon commonly referred to as the "feminization" of the labor force: a term that is used in different ways. For some scholars it refers to the fact that, since the 1960s, women's share in the labor force has increased around the world, both in absolute numbers and relative to men. However, other scholars use the term to refer to the fact that many jobs and activities traditionally dominated by men have recently been "feminized," meaning that they have been downgraded into the type of work traditionally geared to women—i.e., low-paid or "flexible" (Standing 1989). The fact that both forms of "feminization"—the increased use of female labor, and the informalization, such as lower wages, and less regulation of working conditions—often go hand in hand captures the complexity of the development process and its contradictory impact on women's employment.

Although since 1950 women's official labor-force participation² in the developing world has increased dramatically, the trend between 1970 and 1990 was uneven (UN 1991, 83). During that time, women's share in the labor force increased in Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East; stayed constant in Asia;³ and declined in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ In Africa, principally due to severe economic conditions, the growth in female labor force participation has actually fallen well behind the growth in population (UN 1991, 83). These uneven trends in women's labor force participation rates reflect uneven patterns of economic development—due either to economic recession, economic privatization and liberalization, or economic globalization—which became particularly pronounced during the 1980s. These uneven patterns of growth affected women's work in a variety of ways, including:

- 1. Fewer Jobs in General.** In much of the world, women continue to be the last to benefit from job expansion and the first to suffer from job contraction. Across most countries, the lower the per-capita income, the lower the proportion of women employed in the formal sector. This is why so many women around the world are forced to create their own jobs or enterprises in order to gain access to cash income—usually with few resources and little support (UN 1991, 93).
- 2. Working at Home, Minus Labor Benefits.** Many of the "jobs" created by recent industrial expansion actually represent a shift to decentralized and more flexible labor relations whereby labor-intensive, lower-paid, more informal tasks are subcontracted out, usually to women workers (Standing 1989, 1080). In southeast Asia, for example, women factory workers are often excluded from assembly lines when they marry and

have children. Frequently, their only option then is to become engaged in industrial subcontracting within their own homes, which usually pays at a significantly lower rate and offers no benefits (Pongpaichit 1988).

3. Pursuit of Lower Wages: Substituting Women for Men. The pursuit of lower wages by businesses and industries often leads to the substitution of women workers for men because men are less likely to work for sub-minimal wages. This practice is most notable in the export-oriented manufacturing sector (Standing 1989).

4. Loss of Benefits. The deregulation of labor markets associated with privatization and liberalization affects women in various ways, including undermining whatever protective effect regulations might have had on wages, worker benefits, job security, and working hours. For example, women workers in the export-oriented, labor-intensive “free trade zones” (for example, electronic assembly and garment manufacturing plants located in areas such as along the U.S.-Mexico border) tend to enjoy fewer rights and benefits than women workers in the private formal sector outside the zones (Standing 1989; Elson 1991).

The crucial point is that although in some ways women may be gaining economically by their increased share in the labor force,⁵ the “feminization” of the labor force, as noted above, has also led to pervasive insecurity. As Standing (1989) has noted, “Traditionally, women have been relegated predominantly to more precarious and low-income forms of economic activity.” The fear now is that their increased economic role reflects a spread of those forms of economic activity to many other sectors of the economy.

III. Response of the International Women’s Movement: Research and Theory

These contradictory trends for women and the persistent gender inequality associated with recent economic development (in both the developing and developed worlds) have forced women scholars to reexamine existing models of the household, the current understanding of how markets function, and orthodox theories about the links between economic forces and gender inequality. As a result, research and action over the last decade have had quite a different focus than they did between 1975 and 1985.

Over the past decade, women scholars have contributed to our understanding of the “feminization” of the labor force by highlighting the fact that women’s entry into the paid labor force often represents a “distress sale” of their labor; that women work long hours for a “pittance”; that women work long hours at both paid and unpaid work; that certain low-paid occupations have always been stereotyped as female; and that recent

economic forces have converted some “male” occupations into “female” occupations because they now offer lower wages and fewer benefits (Elson 1992).

In terms of women’s roles within households, women scholars have moved beyond documenting age and gender hierarchies within the household to further conceptualize intrahousehold relationships in terms of the interplay of divergent male/female interests. This has meant going beyond both the neoclassical and Marxian paradigms of households—which assume equality and harmony within the household unit—to models that acknowledge that different members have different needs, rights, and responsibilities and that both conflict and cooperation exist within households (Folbre 1988; Sen 1990).

Moreover, women scholars are now faced with the challenge of reconceptualizing what actually constitutes a household. That is, they have found that they can no longer afford to focus only on the crisis *within* the household but must address the crisis *of* the household itself. For example, we now know that while marriage remains nearly universal across most regions and social groups, women in many settings will spend a considerable portion of their reproductive lives without a spouse in residence—e.g., in some West African countries, from one-third to one-half of their reproductive years.⁶ Furthermore, in many countries, the number of families and households supported by women is increasing.⁷

In terms of the gender division of work, scholars have moved beyond documenting women’s relative time burden—the “double” or “triple” day’s work—to analyzing the root causes of that burden, as well as its implications for women’s ability to achieve physical well-being, social status, and political power. In this regard it has become apparent that whereas the gender division of the labor force has been changing—more women are spending longer hours at paid work—the gender division of family responsibilities has not changed. Despite growing discussion and debate, men in almost all cultures continue to devote a relatively small proportion of their time to household tasks and child care.

Therefore, while many women today are spending longer hours in paid work, they continue to spend long hours in unpaid work as well. It is apparent that entry into the paid labor force will not bring the expected benefits to women as long as their work is underpaid, hazardous, unprotected, and insecure, and as long as women are not able to control the income or resources generated by their employment.

In terms of our understanding of women’s roles in household livelihood and survival strategies, studies have highlighted that many poor households are no longer coping only with known local conditions such as seasonality, droughts, or floods. Rather, they are now having to cope with

broad, often unknown forces related to economic restructuring and the global economic crisis.

Finally, with regard to our understanding of women's subordination to men, we now know that the early assumption that modern capitalist development would loosen patriarchal control has proved false. Growing evidence reveals that while recent economic development has served to undermine traditional systems of reciprocity and sharing based on kinship and community ties, it has not loosened men's control over women's labor and mobility or reduced the degree to which women's access to markets (land, labor, and credit) is negotiated or controlled by men. The conclusion, therefore, is that loosening traditional forms of social security based on relationships among family and kin, in the absence of some form of social security provided by the state, has in fact generally served to disadvantage women.

In brief, over the past two decades, those of us concerned with issues of women's economic development have had to interpolate into our analysis how the traditional path of economic development and the traditional family and gender systems affect women (in contrast to men) and to consider the specific short-term impacts of acute political and economic crises on women. And we have had to strengthen our capacity to address the various forces that shape the structure of women's lives. These forces include: chronic, long-term forces such as the traditional structures of the family and the marketplace; persistent development crises such as poverty and uneven patterns of growth; the quiet but alarming crisis of family and broader social disintegration; and the more recent global crises in the political arena (militarism, fundamentalism, and ethno-nationalism) and in the economic arena (debt, trade, economic restructuring, and environment).

IV. Response of the International Women's Movement: Policy and Action

But have increased knowledge and understanding translated into action? At the level of policy and program design, women planners have developed an approach which takes into account the fact that women and men play different roles and have different needs and that women face both practical everyday basic needs as well as more strategic long-term needs. As Caroline Moser, a leading gender planner, describes the situation, women face practical needs which derive from the specific conditions under which they live and work, as well as strategic needs which derive from the structure and nature of their relationship with men (Moser 1989, 1799).

But how do these gender planning concepts translate into action? To illustrate with an example from this volume, the women in India who were